



OUR SHORT STORY PAGE



A DOUBLE BARRELED LOVE AFFAIR

Yum-Yum Yarn of the Cow Country. How the Kid—Bless His Heart—Wins a Virginia Heiress.

By NORMAN CROWELL.

HAMILTON THORPE suddenly threw his hat into the air and drew his six-shooter. "Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang!"

Then, calmly replacing the weapon, he picked up the hat and critically examined the half dozen neat round holes that now adorned it.

With an air of complete satisfaction he placed the hat on his head and resumed the perusal of a pink-tinted missive that seemed to have caused the outbreak. As he read it was plainly evident to the most casual observer that he was in ecstatic spirits. In fact, in all the five years since quitting Harvard for the fascination of plains life Thorpe had not experienced the soulful content that now filled his breast.

At the conclusion of his reading he carefully folded the letter, smelled it lingeringly and tucked it away deep in a pocket.

"Bless her heart!" he ejaculated; "who'd ever imagine she'd consent to become Mrs. to a condemned, feather-haired cowpuncher like—Hello, Kid, what's up?"

A puncher was swinging himself hurriedly down from a panting steed near at hand.

"Nothin' much, I guess; only can I git th' loan o' yer handwritin' a minute till I write a letter?" asked the puncher, as he exhibited an envelope from his shirt-bosom and fumbled it clumsily.

"Sure—but what sort?" replied Thorpe.

"Oh! jest reggulation love!" said the Kid, easily.

"An' put it in as warm as ye kin without scorchin' th' paper. Here's th' gal's name an' residence all proper."

He tendered the betumbled envelope toward Thorpe, who took it with a smile and sniffed quizzically at one corner.

"Pretty healthy perfumery, eh, Kid?" he asked.

"H'm, ya-as, rather. This here's th' atomizer she uses," and the puncher produced a large-sized plug of tobacco that had shared the missive's hiding place.

"Got any paper, Kid?"

The Kid drew into the flap of his saddle and drew out a few sheets of wrinkled paper.

"Chalk?" pursued Thorpe.

"Left my fountain pen on th' planner, Dude, an' I guess it'll have to be a lead pencil. Peel 'er down to a razor edge an' say when yer ready!"

Dude Thorpe (for such he was to the boys of the Triple-O outfit) smoothed the sheets of paper across Domino's saddle-leather and prepared for action.

"Fire away, Kid!" he announced.

The Kid's brows darkened with the effort of applied thought and he seized his chin in a strenuous grip.

"Of course ye lead off with 'er name an' address, don't ye? Maybe I'll have something thunk up time ye git that done."

Thorpe dug into the Kid's letter and ran his eye hastily down the final page in search of the lady's name. Then—of a sudden—he nearly choked. As it was, the Kid glanced quickly up and eyed him suspiciously.

"Got a spell comin', Dude?" he inquired hazily.

"H'm—swallowed a fly?" said Thorpe, as he worked his chin up and down ponderously. He then took a second survey of the name and spelled it out letter for letter to the end. Yes—he could not be mistaken—it was a remarkable coincidence and a grand, good joke on the Kid—but Hamilton Thorpe happened to know the lady whose name was affixed to the awkward puncher's missive.

"Mabel Gentry, Westhampton, Virginia!" he read. His eyes danced as he recalled Mabel's dark beauty and bon vivant air. What on earth could she be doing with an individual like Kid Holton, a lowly cowpuncher in far-away Texas? Ah! Bessie would know! His Bessie—the girl who had promised to become Mrs. to a condemned, feather-headed cowpuncher—she would solve the mystery. For Bessie Winton lived in Westhampton, and the three, Bessie, Mabel and Hamilton Thorpe, were fellow-alumni of the Westhampton High. Therefore, Thorpe chuckled softly to himself as he squared himself to receive the Kid's dictation.

"Feelin' better now, Dude?" asked the Kid, abruptly.

"Fine, Kid! What'll go first?"

"Well, tell 'er I have received 'er letter an' contents duly noticed. Fix it up smoother'n that if possible, Dude. I don't want to look too dummed ignorant if I kin help it, ye know!"

"Sure not!" said Thorpe, writing swiftly.

"Then break away with something about 'er' description bein' enough to make an old maverick-chaser want to file his teeth on 'er Virginia roarin' ears—or something soft an' touchin' like that. Tell 'er brunettes is my favorite an' always was. When ye git that, let me know an' I've got a clincher for ye to put in!"

The puncher eyed his amanuensis admiringly as his pencil flew over the paper. He was studying his "clinchin'," however, and when Thorpe presently rested he was prepared.

"Now say something like this—'Your name is sweet as rock candy an' I have been sayin' it to myself all last night on th' lonely prairie with th' savage mountain lions—jest got to drag in them lions, Dude—th' savage lions a-roarin' round me while I slept!'"

"Great idea, Kid—how about mentionin' a few badgers an' woodchucks, also?" suggested Thorpe, anxiously.

"Nope—they lions are a-plenty for this trip. Next time maybe I'll have a grizzly bear or so tryin' to eat me—can't use up all my ammunition at th' start, you know."

but got run out, I have three sisters, one lame, an' I'm hankerin' to trot double!"

Thorpe whistled and looked hard at the Kid.

"Did you git it, Dude?" the latter asked innocently.

Thorpe turned to his work and wrote busily for several minutes. Then he lifted his head and yawned.

"Did ye tell 'er I wa'n't so infernal pore-lookin' in th' features, Dude?"

"Told 'er you wan an angel, Kid—kind-hearted'er n a she-goat," said Thorpe.

"Naw!" The Kid's eyes glowed in glad surprise.

That night Hamilton Thorpe sat up late penning another letter that went to Westhampton, Virginia. He had resolved to husband his little secret—at any rate to inaugurate a bit of detective work before making any serious fractures in the Kid's hopes. With this end in view he quietly but scientifically sorted the Kid's trousers when that gentleman was in the distant land of Nod. Thorpe's disappointment was keen as he surveyed the sum total of his disclosures—a grimy copy of a newspaper. But not an ordinary newspaper, either—he looked at it critically—it was the strangest-appearing paper Thorpe had ever seen.

"H'm—'Lonely Heart,'" he read, as he examined the title.

Then, at a glance, he saw the solution of the mystery. It was plain as day. It read like this:

17077.—Sweet and lovable brunette, aged 20. Only daughter of wealthy parents. Western men preferred. Address Box 441, Westhampton, Virginia.

"That's Mabe Gentry straight as a fiddlestring!" remarked Thorpe, as he carefully adjusted the paper and crowded it back to its place. He then crept off to his bunk and fell asleep with a broad smile upon his bronzed features.

Three weeks drifted by with monotonous regularity—and heat. Indolence characterized the existence of the Triple-O ranch at this season—there was nothing to build, nothing to tear down, nothing to repair. The puncher's sole duty was to eat, drink and be as miserable as heat, dust and idleness can make a human. And then two letters arrived.

Kid Holton and Dude Thorpe, the lucky recipients, ran the gauntlet of green-eyed envy that fairly blazed in the eyes of their mates, and retired to the sacred and quiet precincts of the lower corral. There they broke the carefully sealed envelopes.

Thorpe consumed an unusually long time in the perusal of his letter. Bess had plenty to tell and she told it with girlish abandon and volubility. But when he had finished and leaned back to think it over he became aware that the Kid was still delving heroically into the mystifying contents of Miss Gentry's letter. Observing Thorpe's attitude, the Kid hastily ended his efforts and thrust the letter into his friend's hand.

"Read 'er out, Dude. I—I've got something in my eye!" he said, weakly.

Thorpe ignored the delicate prevarication and took the letter.

It was read—but the reading was done in spots a hundred feet apart, owing to the unparalleled curiosity of the boys, who were found glued to cracks in the corral.

"Whew! Ain't that great, Dude? Nice gal, I'll bet my hoss!" exclaimed Holton, at the close.

"You bet she is, Kid—er—I sort of know 'er!" Thorpe blurted out lamely.

Holton stared at his friend an instant—then turned a dusky red beneath his coat of bronze.

"Haw! Haw! Haw! Say, Dude, that's a good one, eh? That's sure a sassyperlery of a joke, ain't it? Haw! Haw! Haw!"

The Kid slapped his thigh mightily and bent nearly double. Thorpe, after his first feeling of hesitation, stiffened up and looked at Holton sternly.

"It's gospel truth, Kid! I was raised with Mabe Gentry—stole apples from her dad's orchard—went to singin' school with Mabe herself—helped 'er squeeze through an algebra exam, regular once a year—and—Oh, a lot more things! I know Mabe all right, son!"

Holton began kicking at the sod with his boot. Presently he took a long look at the horizon, then turned and faced Thorpe resignedly.

"Well, darn me, Dude! Of course, that cuts th' deal off shorter'n Hank Wilkinson's pup's tail! Jest write 'er so, will ye? Well, hang me for a pig-thief!"

"What? Cuts th' deal off? Why so, Kid?"

"Why so? Oh, now, say, Dude. You don't really reckon us fellers is plain idiots, do ye? Don't ye suppose we're onto you a little—after bein' with you for five years? We know pretty near what class you trotted in before you give it up to take this cow-punchin' punishment—sure we do! An' Kid Holton ain't no fit human to be sidlin' up alongside any critter that has been travelin' in your bunch—no, sir!"

Hamilton Thorpe reddened a trifle. It was his first inkling that the Triple-O boys supposed him to be otherwise than a plain, hard-working cow man. His past he had thought successfully buried.

"Now, look here, Kid!" Hamilton said, placing two fingers forcibly into the palm of his left hand in an authoritative fashion. "I've bunked an' grubbed with you close onto five years, as you say, an' in that time have I ever passed out any hints that I didn't like your style? What I am or have been cuts no figure, Kid. It's what I know you are—and that is a flat-footed, open-and-shut, reliable friend, and by ginger, old man, that girl is yours if Dude Thorpe can make the rifle!"

Holton looked into Thorpe's eyes in open-mouthed wonder.

"No use, Dude—no use. Algebray, you said? Git away, Dude! Imagine me, an old calf-brander with saddle horns on both knees, loomin' up on th' same day with—um—with HER—it'd look fine, wouldn't it—huh?"

"You bet it would! An' you needn't feel so exclusive

about it, Kid. I've got myself—why, th' girl I'm goin' to marry has been studyin' singin' in Europe for three years! An' will she marry a durn cowpuncher with cockleburrs in his hair and maybe gray-backs in his shirt? I guess yes—she will! As to music, Kid, I couldn't tell a note from a gimlet hole in a California sunset—but I'm game on th' other proposition—yes, sir!"

"Ya-as—but—" said Holton, dubiously.

"But what?"

"Well, I've sorter lost my hankerin' for marriage, Dude—honest!"

"H'm—you look like it, Kid! Don't try to make me swallow anything like that, boy. You might as well prepare for the slaughter—mine's to be a year from to-morrow an' yours will be about ten minutes later. Brace up!"

"I can't!"

"But you're a-goin' to, Kid! Hand me that letter again—we'll answer it while th' iron's hot!"

Holton's face was a weird study in strained humor

death of Abner Gentry at the age of 64, and incidentally remarking that the estate, consisting of a paltry hundred thousand dollars or so, descended to his sole heir, Mabel Gentry. Thorpe whistled as he read the lines and yelled for Holton. The latter was quizzically examining the address on a dark-rimmed envelope, but answered his chum's call.

"News, Kid—great—er—um—got a letter, eh?" Here, let me read it to you!"

Thorpe seized the missive eagerly and snatched out the contents.

It was a shock. Miss Gentry had penned a few brief lines stating the sad facts of her father's death and further that she considered it time to end the correspondence with Holton. It was plainly evident that she was heartbroken over the death of her parent.

"Well, suppose you read it to ME once!" growled Holton, after a lengthy wait.

Thorpe read it—not as it was written—but after a style of his own—ready made, in fact. The death of her father was mentioned, also the loneliness and grief

heaped upon two stalwart, sunbrowned cowmen, who were doing their best to appear at ease under the fusillade. But there was enough hearty handshakes at the end of it to reassure the pair and soften their hearts toward their rollicking companions.

A few days later the two climbed stiffly off the limited at Westhampton, Va. One was eager, anxious, impetuous to rush away because of a certain girl—the other was also eager, anxious and impetuous to rush away—and because of another girl.

Holton laid a firm grip on his friend's arm.

"Go slow, Dude—I'm gittin' trembly in th' legs," he said.

"What ye afraid of? Pickpockets?"

Holton gave him an eloquent look and tightened his grip.

"I hope those girls won't see us until we get a shave and—"

Just then a lurid and beribboned cyclone landed plump against Thorpe's big chest and Holton staggered back aghast.

"Ham—il—ton Thorpe! Oh! YOU!" shrieked a feminine voice from somewhere, under Thorpe's right arm.

Holton pulled nervously at his tight-fitting vest and coughed.

"Kid, can you stand up ag'in that?" he asked himself as he watched them narrowly out of the tail of his eye.

Then Thorpe came to himself and held the girl out at arm's length from him.

"Cut loose, Bess! I've got a friend here, somewhere—Hil come here, Kid! Um—Miss Winton—Mr. Holton."

Then he nudged Holton in the ribs and whispered: "Say something, you cattle thief."

Holton hung to Miss Winton's dainty finger tips and blushed rosy.

"Well, miss, I don't have to tell you I'm glad to see you. Fact is, I've been plumb locoed waitin' to see th' girl Du—er—Mr. Thorpe has been talkin' about for th' last several years—an' I can say, follerin' that idea out, that I don't blame him by a blame sight."

"Hi! None of that, Kid! I'll do all of THAT in this case—ha! ha!"

Miss Winton looked earnestly up into Holton's sunburned face.

"Mr. Thorpe never says anything very bad about me, does he?" she inquired.

"H'm—well, he says things he'd never dare say about me, miss—that's sure," responded Holton, who was rapidly feeling his oats, for a cowpuncher.

"Of course, you will remain to the—to my—that is, our—"

Thorpe covered her confusion by abruptly breaking in:

"Will he? Well, Bess, you can bank on it that he will be on hand, looming up like a brindle-tailed comet on a still Sunday night—eh, old man?"

"Ya-as, jest about," was Holton's weak reply.

At this moment a feminine figure appeared in a doorway on the opposite corner. Thorpe glanced at the lady sharply and nudged Miss Winton's elbow surreptitiously.

"Who is that, Bess?" She looks familiar—is it Mabe?" he whispered.

Miss Winton took a lightning survey of the corner opposite.

"Of course it's Mabe," she remarked. Holton's knees grew decidedly wobbly as he heard it, and he glanced appealingly toward his friend.

"I say, Dude—my whiskers, you know—you don't—"

"Your whiskers are a freckled red, Kid—this ain't a question of whiskers—it's a matter of matrimony. That girl is an heiress—you are an adventurer—but, by good luck, you will win out—come on!"

A few moments later a young lady of Westhampton came near having a slight attack of apoplexy, another was filled with wonder and two big men stood and blushed like schoolboys. But presently two chattering couples strolled down a shady side street, intent only on themselves and each other. Holton was shaking hands with himself mightily at the wonderful nerve he was displaying. It was amazing, that nerve was. As the tactful young lady at his side fluently described the town and its people, Holton speedily cultivated a princely sang froid.

Miss Gentry, thinking his visit due to Thorpe's forthcoming marriage, did not refer to their correspondence, nor did he. Discreet silence concerning it seemed the better part of valor to Holton and he played the part with vigor. Later, at the separation, his bow, if anything, was lower and more diplomatic than was that of Dude Thorpe himself.

"A gentleman in the rough," was Miss Gentry's comment to her glass, later that evening.

A month, for some things, is time enough—two months better and three an ample sufficiency.

It would be impolite to eavesdrop on the many meetings that occurred between Holton, of Texas, and Miss Gentry, of Virginia, and it would require hardihood to relate what was learned if such a course had been pursued. For the most part their conversation was conducted in too low a tone for chance ears to pry by. But the details of two weddings filled the local newspaper at a date shortly thereafter and two cowpunchers were made supremely happy. And when old man Thorpe opened his heart and handed his son a check for—well, quite a sum—two cowboy yells out the peaceful Virginia air. The Triple-O ranch was marked in red on their wedding itinerary.



"Oh, jest reggulation love!" said the kid easily.

as he passed it over. Thorpe seized it, crammed it into a pocket and the pair strolled back to the waiting group in front of the bunk house.

Time passed on—slowly enough to Thorpe, but with winged speed to Kid Holton, who figured each day as one nearer an enforced desertion of an increasingly valuable bachelorhood, and hoped mightily that Thorpe's schemes might miscarry in any one of a hundred ways—none of which, however, occurred to his mind.

As to Thorpe, he bent himself assiduously to the task in hand, carrying on a double correspondence that would have done credit to an expert bigamist. He forced the Kid to listen to and avow the authenticity of every letter sent Miss Gentry, and orated in glowing terms of satisfaction upon the success of the plan as measured by the increasing warmth of the young lady's missives.

Meantime, he privately instilled a smattering of the primary branches of education into the partially submissive Holton and in eight months' time had his pupil penning his first real letter. The handwriting was not everything that it could have been, but it approximated the brand affected by Thorpe closely enough to deceive the unsuspecting.

As the date of Hamilton Thorpe's wedding approached the two men had many heated arguments over the matter. Thorpe, by dealing painfully upon the penalty usually visited upon professional mashers and lady-killers, and by throwing the Kid flatly back upon his cowboy honor as a last resort, invariably came off victor.

In Bessie Winton's next letter was a clipping from the Westhampton "Gazette" chronicling the sudden

of the lady, which dwelt upon with fervid sentences and ending with an earnest appeal for a speedy response. He did it artistically—the brute.

"Th' pore critter!" said Holton, at the end. "I do reckon she thinks she loves me!"

"DOES she?"

Thorpe swelled his chest out and gave a sniff meant to signify disgust.

"But—er—that hundred thousand—now, it wouldn't be no fair shakes for a cuss like me to—"

"Shut up, Kid! Money's the cheapest thing there is. Forget it."

"There's one thing certain, Dude—we're a-goin' to surprise them females a-plenty—specially one of 'em!"

"It won't kill 'em, Kid," returned Thorpe, as he watched his fellow puncher straining himself inside a brand-new suit of black clothes that still had the San Antonio tag on them.

"Gosh! these duds fit me soon, Dude. Look an' see if my shoulderblades are stickin' through—they feel like it," said Holton, after a lengthy struggle.

"No, they're inside yet—but doin' their level best to get th' air. Guess they'll carry you through all right if you don't try to pick up anything."

That night was a busy one with Hamilton Thorpe and Kid Holton. The former had decided to start east and Holton had felt the force of an hour's heated interview to such advantage that he, too, was making preparations with that end in view.

Bright and early next morning they were off. The entire camp, barring the cook, accompanied them to Weeping Tree station, fifteen miles across the prairie. The trip was made memorable by the personal